

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

Media Office

Democratic Caucus

John Schorg, Director

Statehouse, Room 157

Indianapolis, Indiana 46204

1-800-382-9842 or 1-317-232-9621

Fax Number: 1-317-232-9792

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

January 6, 2006

REP. TRENT VAN HAAFTEN'S STATEHOUSE REPORT

INDIANAPOLIS – The trips back and forth to Statehouse have begun! The 2006 legislative session kicked off last Wednesday, and although it is a short session, it promises to be packed with action.

Since it is the short session of the Legislature, our work is scheduled to be completed by mid-March. Ideally, this session is supposed to be devoted only to those matters that are believed to be emergencies. The question remains as to what are real emergencies and which are only perceived emergencies.

The chief concern expressed on both sides of the aisle is property taxes. As many predicted last spring, the biennial state budget approved by the majorities in the House and Senate and signed into law by the governor contained large property tax increases and cuts in funding for public schools. Now that the reality of these increases are scheduled to arrive in the mail come April, members of the majority have seen the light, and have expressed an interest in doing something to help families and business owners with property taxes.

How will that be done? There have been varying proposals offered. House Democrats have proposed using a portion of the \$255 million collected from the recent tax amnesty toward reducing welfare levies, which are expected to increase by nearly 40 percent statewide. The governor wants to use that amnesty money to build up the state's budget surplus. It seems fair to me to use a portion of the money collected from "tax cheats" to give relief to well-deserving Hoosiers who have paid their taxes on time, but have seen their property taxes go up.

Another idea being proposed to relieve property taxes is to give local units of government the ability to enact local option taxes, with the idea that this revenue will be used to cut property taxes. There are some who view this plan as yet another tax increase, with no real relief coming in return for home and business owners. By the end of the session, I hope we are able to use a portion of the tax amnesty funds to provide immediate relief, while also looking at the means to provide a fairer tax system to both property owners and consumers.

For southwestern Indiana, one of the more important issues is Gov. Daniels' "Major Moves" proposals. The governor's plan is to spend \$10.6 billion on road construction projects over the next decade, including the extension of Interstate 69 in southern Indiana, and in northern Indiana, completing the Hoosier Heartland Corridor, improving U.S. 31, and selling the Toll Road.

As to I-69, the majority of discussion has been whether the road should be a toll road. As much as I dislike the idea of having to pay to travel to my state capitol when the rest of Indiana gets there for free, if this is what it takes to construct the road, then so be it.

However, this question of toll road or no toll road is not the final question to consider. What if I told you that once I-69 is built, every time you pay a toll to travel to our state capitol, your toll money is being sent to a foreign company like Australia or Spain. As a Hoosier, is that acceptable to you?

The Daniels Administration seeks to put I-69 on the auction block to the highest bidder through privatization. At this point, I simply cannot support such a sale of our state assets, especially to foreign interests. I have jokingly wondered if we would see something along the lines of "Mile 28 sponsored by ABC Corporation" or maybe selling the naming rights to

various exits and on ramps.

The merits of privatization of our roadways and other government services remain to be discussed on the floors of the Indiana House and Senate, and I will refrain from offering my total support or opposition until I am educated about the safeguards that the administration intends to have to protect Hoosiers from increased fees, employment opportunities and accountability for these services.

Education will remain a concern in 2006. As we look for ways to provide more assistance for schools that were forced to lay off teachers and cut programs by the majority's state budget, we will consider the governor's proposal to put more money in the classroom. Details are sketchy, but at least one component of the plan calls for joint purchasing of items like school buses. I have always believed citizens should have the best in services, while making the difficult balance of delivering the service at an economical rate. If school districts are truly able to save money through joint purchasing agreements, then by all means they need to have the authority to do so.

Many people have asked me about the controversy over the opening prayer in the House. After a minister led the House in the song "Walk with Jesus" last year, four clergy members of varying faiths filed a federal lawsuit seeking to prohibit the state-sponsored opening prayer from referring to a specific deity or faith. Ultimately, the federal court ruled prayer was allowed to take place, but it should be addressed to all faiths as opposed to referencing a specific faith.

As a result, the Speaker has decided to forego allowing an opening prayer. Rather, legislators either as a group or individually, may still pray as they see fit. Although we have only had two session days, this may actually bring us, as legislators, closer together since we are able to share our respective faith with one another in a more direct, personal way.

In closing, I want to remind you of the Meet Your Legislators session scheduled this Saturday, January 14 at the Poseyville Community Center, beginning at 9 a.m. Sen. Larry Lutz and I will be available to update you on the session and answer your questions.

Throughout the 2006 session, I hope you will stay in touch with me to provide your comments and concerns about issues before the Legislature. There are three easy ways to contact me.

You can call me on the toll-free Statehouse telephone number of 1-800-382-9842.

You can e-mail me through my Internet Web site at www.IN.gov/H76.

If you prefer the old-fashioned approach, you can write to me at:

State Rep. Trent Van Haaften
200 W. Washington St.
Indianapolis, IN 46204

I look forward to hearing from you.

---30---

This news release can be accessed on the Internet at www.IN.gov/H76